Labeling the Good: Alternative Visions and Organic Branding in Sweden in the Late Twentieth Century

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The past decade's rapid expansion of a global market for organic food has set powerful economic and political forces in motion. The most important dividing line is whether organic food production should be an alternative to or a niche within a capitalist mode of production. To explore this conflict the article analyzes the formation of a market for eco-labeled milk in Sweden. The analysis draws on three aspects: the strategy of agri-business, the role of eco-labeling, and the importance of inter-organizational dynamics. Based on archival studies, daily press, and interviews, three processes are emphasized: the formative years of the alternative movement in the 1970s, the founding of an independent eco-label (KRAV) in the 1980s, and a discursive shift from alternative visions to organic branding in the early 1990s following the entry of agri-business.

Since corporate managers help to shape the relationship between humans and nature, a need exists for business historians to discuss sustainable development.[1] One important task is to further our understanding of how corporations and social movements interact—in col-

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1. Rosen, "Doing Business" Redclift "An Oxymoron."

laboration or opposition—to form new markets.[2] Research on Corporate Social Responsibility offers a useful point of departure. Some CSR research includes normative studies on how corporate responsibility should be defined and controlled, for example, through codes of conduct or eco-labeling schemes.[3] Other scholars have been more interested in the organizational processes behind the formulation of particular definitions of responsibility.[4] This article focuses on the latter, and specifically on how the interplay of corporations, NGOs, politicians, and media shaped the market for organic milk in Sweden. In comparison with the United States, the Swedish case reveals more collaboration between alternative and conventional actors, in line with what Michelsen et al. describe as "creative conflicts".[5]

The 2009 world market for organic food was estimated to be worth well over fifty billion U.S. dollars.[6] The past decade's rapid expansion of demand for organic food has been fuelled by general concerns for environmental issues. At the same time, the consumer's role has become prominent in both social science and politics. In the wake of increased affluence, a general trend towards deregulation, and the recognition of narrative aspects of consumption, we perceive people more as consumers and relatively less as workers and citizens. Consumption is said to dictate production, spur innovation, and drive modern politics. Environmental problems, in this view, could and should be solved by the benevolent choices of conscientious consumers.[7] Social scientists interested in the narrative aspects of consumption study how consumers express noneconomic values through the market. In this expanding field, researchers use a framework called political consumerism to analyze how eco-labels and fair-trade schemes drive a new kind of politics, parallel to party-centered and national state level politics.[8] The case of organic milk presented here demonstrates how political issues moved from the conventional arena to the market place when producers delegated responsibility for certain environmental issues to consumers, via eco-labels.

2. Davis et al., "Social Movements," 2008.

3. Stokke et al., "Ecolabelling"; Young and Tilley, "Beyond Efficiency." CSR and the concept's historical development at large are discussed by Utting and Clapp, "Corporate Accountability"; Michael, "An Overview and Critique."

4. Klintman and Boström, "Framings of Science"; Ahlström and Egels-Zandén, "Garment."

5. Klintman and Boström, "Framings of Science"; Michelsen et al., *Organic Farming*, 2001.

6. Research and Markets, "Food: Global Industry Guide."

7. Michelletti, *Political Virtue and Shopping*; Gabriel and Lang, *The Unmanagable Consumer*.

8. For an overview, see Boström et al., *Political Consumerism*.

Taken together, environmental concerns and consumer orientations have set powerful economic and political forces in motion; as a result organic food now attracts the interest of small-scale farmers, global food conglomerates, and consumer activists. This surge of interest has been reinforced by political initiatives to support sustainable development.[9] However, the philosophical roots of organic farming include a general criticism of industrialized agriculture and more general doubts about the interplay between human and nature as reflected in modern technology.[10] Therefore, the rapid growth of organic farming has also raised the issue of whether agribusiness has co-opted and diluted the organic concept.[11] Michael Pollan offers an in-depth account of this conflict in *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, referring to a discussion where a corporate organic grower advises a small farmer to develop a niche to distinguish himself in the market. The farmer replies: "I believe I developed that niche twenty years ago. It's called 'organic'. And now you, sir, are sitting on it."[12] Furthermore, the concept of agribusiness may be more complex in many European countries, where large cooperative firms played important roles in the agricultural sector during the twentieth century (and to some extent still do).[13] This is certainly true for the Swedish case.

So, while the radicals argue that organic farming should offer an alternative to conventional agriculture, reformists argue that the organic farming movement may have a greater impact through collaboration with agribusiness. Because this debate involves the whole food chain, from farm to table, it also includes the distribution and marketing of organic food—in the United States the supermarket Whole Foods is at the frontline of this conflict. Pollan draws on the narrative aspects of consumption when he describes the marketing of organic food as a literary genre called "supermarket pastoral". This genre is full of references like "sustainable", "home-made," "free-range," "old-fashioned," or "locally produced".[14] Values like animal welfare or bio-diversity and restrictions on synthetic inputs underpin these references, and these values are the basis from which the rules for organic farming are derived. Eco-labels are a way to embed these values in the product in a standardized way, for they communicate values

9. Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth*.

10. Michelsen, "Recent Development," 3.

11. Buck et al., "From Farm to Table". In 2001 the article was followed up by a special issue of *Sociologica Ruralis*, "Politics, Ideology and Practice of Organic Farming". See also Guthman, "The Trouble" and Lockie and Halpin, "Conventionalisation Thesis Reconsidered."

12. Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, 277.

13. Van der Krogt et al., "The Impact of Cooperative"; Rydén, *Marknaden, miljön*, 23–48.

14. Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, 219–28.

and encourage consumers to pay producers (and retailers) a premium for this embedding. The problem, though, is that there is seldom a clear-cut way to translate values into production methods. Therefore, both the actual production methods and the narrative aspects of market communication are integral to the organic food market.[15]

This essay analyzes the historical roots of the market for organic food in Sweden and uses eco-labeled milk as a sectoral study to explore the alleged conflict between critical environmentalists and green business advocates. The case study implies a displacement from the alternative visions of the environmental movement in the 1970s to an emerging corporate discourse of organic branding in the 1990s—elsewhere described as a process of ecological modernization.[16] However, Sweden does not present a hostile takeover by agribusiness. Rather, important actors came from different arenas—NGOs, media, politics, and business—and their interplay shaped the emerging market. When the cooperative movement partially bridged the gap between radicals and reformists, it also strengthened the element of path dependency, with its legacy from Sweden's postwar corporatist culture and a climate of consensus-driven organizing. Hence, I argue that inter-organizational dynamics, combined with national path dependencies, is crucial to understanding the emergence of this market.

The analysis presented here draws on three aspects of the historical evolution: the strategy of agribusiness, eco-labels' roles, and inter-organizational dynamics. The purpose is to explain the strategic choices regarding environmental issues made by the board of the agribusiness, Arla, in the late 1980s and early 1990s. I argue that inter-organizational dynamics and path dependencies of the Swedish agricultural system can explain the board's actions in terms of the environmental challenges the enterprise faced. Eco-labeling was a particularly important issue because the organization responsible for the labeling scheme—KRAV—was run by its members and only organizations could become members in KRAV. Therefore KRAV deployed an arena where alternative and conventional organizations discussed environmental issues, negotiated certification rules, and furthered a consensus-oriented framework.

This analysis is based on archival materials, periodicals, the daily press, and interviews. In the main, the archives of two companies have been used: the dairy firm Arla and the interest-based organiza-

15. Weber et al., "Forage for Thought." The authors analyze the growth of the market for grass-fed cattle in the United States, and they show the close links between production methods, communicative competence, and market success. Since Michael Pollan is one of the most influential advocates of this production method, they also give *The Omnivore's Dilemma* a special role in the formation of this market.

16. Jamison, *Making of Green Knowledge*, 95–6; Redclift, "An Oxymoron," 216.

tion MMAB [Mejeriernas Marknads AB].[17] MMAB was a transformed remnant of an earlier industrial organization in the Swedish dairy industry, when Sweden was divided into regulated local monopolies. MMAB was more market oriented than its predecessor, and its mission was to distribute information relevant for the whole industry and, to some extent, to coordinate market strategies amongst its members (all of the larger dairies were members of MMAB). Arla was the largest dairy in Sweden during the twentieth century, a position further strengthened after a wave of mergers in the early 1970s. In the 1990s, the focus in this article, Arla controlled 60 percent of the Swedish dairy market, and its merger with the Danish MD Foods in 2000 (creating Arla MD Foods) established it on the top five list of global dairy players.[18] Board meeting minutes disclosed inside information on Arla's strategic choices, but correspondence with other organizations is equally important because it sheds a different light on the issues at stake. These archives, to which access was granted without limitation, are an invaluable source of the inter- and intra-organizational dynamics. Periodicals and daily papers of the time revealed public opinion about organic food. Five partially structured interviews were conducted with individuals holding central positions in their respective organizations in the late 1980s and early 1990s.[19] Though this limited sample cannot claim to provide exhaustive coverage of the organic sector, the interviews were with key players and thus broadly captured key developments during the market's formative years. The interviewees represented both the radical and the reformist side of the organic market. As the interviews mainly sought to secure an outside perspective on Arla, only one interview with a representative from Arla was undertaken. The other interviewees had dealings with the company from different angles—delivering milk to, ordering dairy products from, and negotiating eco-label rules with it, for example. The interviews were conducted in parallel with the archival work, so it was possible to check oral information in the archival sources and follow up in archival work points made in the interviews. All in all, though their number was limited, the interviews provided a valuable complement to archival sources.

The findings are detailed in three sections. The first discusses the background to the modern organic foods industry, from the anthropo-

17. MMAB was the name in the early 1990s; in 1998 it was changed to Svensk Mjölk.

18. SOU, "Konkurrenslagens," 203; Van der Krogt, "The Impact of Cooperative," 459.

19. Gunnar Rundgren (KRAV), Jörgen Hedeås (Värmlandsmejerier), Inger Källander (Alternativodlarnas Riksförbund), Mikael Robertsson (KF), and Ingrid Bäckman-Persson (Arla).

sophic critique of the early twentieth century through the alternative movement of the 1970s. It also describes the important corporatist legacy of the postwar Swedish economy. The second section addresses the formative years in the 1980s, when the environmental movement established itself as a political category in Sweden and when the ecolabel KRAV was established. The third section examines the dairy industry, where the discursive shift from alternative visions to organic branding in the early 1990s is detailed.

Modern Farming and the Birth of an Environmental Discourse

The critique of modern agricultural practices is almost as old as the practices themselves. In the first half of the twentieth century, the writings of Rudolf Steiner, Albert Howard, and Eve Balfour were spread all over Europe. A main theme in these visionary commentaries was a holistic concern that humanity's relation to the rest of nature was de-stabilized by modernization. The use of "unnatural" chemicals impoverished the humus-rich soil, which represented a living system and the basis for all life.[20] Elin Wägner, the famous Swedish feminist, argued along the same lines, maintaining that industrialized agriculture had resulted in war on both the planet itself and its living inhabitants.[21]

However, the first wave of organic farmers inspired by these authors remained marginal. They were at odds with the strong structural transformation of the agricultural sector in the Western world.[22] The backbone of the structural transformation in Sweden was the compromise between the farmers' movement and the social democratic party in 1933 and their mutual agreement of 1947. The latter protected farmers from world market competition through price controls and import regulations. The government and farmers' representatives together set regulated prices on a yearly basis. The negotiated economy that emerged from these agreements was not restricted to the agricultural sector, and the Swedish cooperative movement appropriated a key role in these policy networks. The marriage of strong corporatist elements with strong cooperative

20. Steiner, *Geisteswissenschaftliche*; Howard, *An Agricultural Testament*; Balfour, *The Living Soil*. See also Conford, "The Front Line," 67–6; Lampkin, "Organic Farming," 6.

21. Wägner, "Fred med jorden"; Leppänen, *Elin Wägner*; Lindholm, "Ekologiskt lantbruk," 162–64.

22. Vail et al., *The Greening*, 57; Flygare and Isacson, "Jordbruket," 21.

movements was not uniquely Swedish but can be found in the other Nordic countries as well.[23]

The corporatist model was attacked in the 1970s as pollution and social unrest plagued Western capitalist economies despite the surge in productivity during the postwar decades. Economic crisis added momentum to the alternative movements' encompassing critique of the modern society—on issues such as economic growth, energy, peace, gender relations, and pollution.[24] Many of the issues raised by Steiner, Balfour, and Wägner reappeared on political agendas but were reformulated by authors like Rachel Carson and Barry Commoner. By the mid-1980s "the environment" had become a well-established political category, with influential green parties in several countries, including Sweden.[25] The alternative farming movement grew in Sweden, and the Biodynamic Association developed a leading position, albeit supplemented by several other organizations with closer ties to the alternative movement of the 1970s.[26] Alternative farming organizations differed in the details, but all shared the belief that industrial agriculture was destructive and that a new vision was needed. This vision's systemic critique of capitalism was challenged in the late 1980s when a larger group of environmentally concerned consumers became interested in "poison-free" food. Consumer groups' subsequent expansion led to a division of the movement in the early 1990s. The more reformist cluster took control over the eco-label KRAV and changed its name from The Control Organization for Alternative Farming to The Control Organization for Organic Farming (though the acronym KRAV still echoes the old name).[27]

Deregulation and Environmental Formation in the 1980s

While the emerging environmental discourse represented a challenge to prevailing agricultural practices, the neo-liberal critique really shook the foundations of the corporatist agricultural system. Neoliberals attacked the sector's lack of competition and argued that inefficiencies were rampant due to vested interests in the negotiated

23. Rydén, *Marknaden, miljön*, 257–67; Michelletti, *Movement and Government*, 9–17.

24. Vail et al., *The Greening*, 1–2; Jamison, *Making of Green Knowledge*, 16–21; Wiklund, *I det modernas landskap*, 277–312.

25. Jamison, *Making of Green Knowledge*, 80–3; Greene, "Environmental Issues," 389–93.

26. The main competitors to the Biodynamic Association were FNO [Förbundet Naturenlig Odling] and FOBO [Förbundet Organisk Biologisk Odling]. Rydén, *Miljön & politiken*, 78–81.

27. Broberg, "To Do Business," 194–6.

economy. In the 1980s this set off a wave of deregulation in several branches. At the outset, the alternative movement and the neo-liberals attacked the corporatist economy from opposite sides, but by 1990, new connections had been made, which would have important implications for the organic food sector.

In the 1970s the legitimacy of the existing agricultural system eroded in the wake of depressed international food prices and escalating costs for subsidies. Furthermore, widespread farmer dissatisfaction with the effects of the structural transformation process emerged, despite the farmers' relative success in the policy networks.[28] Given these underlying structural problems, the scene was set for a heated public debate on the future of agriculture policy. In 1984, a public-choice-inspired report called *The Political Economy of the Food Sector* was published.[29] The authors launched a frontal attack on the cooperative movement's dominant position and the so-called *iron triangle*—the farmers' organizations, the politicians, and the agricultural experts—allegedly doing their best to preserve the status quo at the expense of taxpayers and consumers. The report marked the beginning of the end for the regulated agricultural system, because in the subsequent debate, farmers did not get their usual support from politicians or agricultural experts, "leaving them to appear as special-interest pleaders."[30] Things continued to go against the farmers in 1989 when the influential consumer committee for agricultural policy declared that structural reforms were necessary. By then the committee's deregulating ambitions had gained broad political support, and a market-liberal discourse was about to overthrow the half-century-long corporatist agreement.[31]

The development of the alternative agriculture movement during the 1980s was less dramatic, but just as important to understanding the formation of the market for organic foods. Whereas the momentum of the original alternative movement faded, professional environmental organizations like Greenpeace and Naturskyddsföreningen grew in size and strength. Pragmatic modes of lobbying and consulting gradually replaced ideas of self-sufficiency and grassroots democracy.[32]

The adverse effects of modern agriculture were also recognized within the Social Democratic Party, and the Swedish parliament introduced a tax on synthetic fertilizers in 1984. Subsequently increased, the tax's direct financial burden in 1988 amounted to 1.5 percent of gross farm receipts. The estimated effect of this was a

28. Vail et al., *The Greening*, 24–35.
29. Lindberg, "The Role of Economists."
30. Ibid; 221.
31. Flygare and Isacson, "Jordbruket," 250–2.
32. Jamison, *The Making*, 82–93.

reduced nitrogen application of about 10 percent.[33] Equally important was that the money raised by this tax was transferred, via a government research fund (Skogs- och Jordbrukets Forskningsråd, SJFR), to research on alternative farming.[34] The alternative farming movement was further strengthened by introducing a special subsidy granted to producers converting to alternative farming. Environmental concerns were top priority for voters in the 1988 election, and the social democratic party saw an opportunity to capitalize on these sentiments by promising transformation subsidies to alternative farmers if they won the election, which they did.[35]

However, while several tendencies spoke in favor of alternative farming in the mid-1980s, the movement was small and divided, still defining itself as an alternative to society at large. As attractive as holism and locally produced vegetables were to certain people, such farmers could not translate the general public's environmental concerns into a vigorous market for alternatively produced foodstuffs. The Biodynamic Association illustrates the situation. It was the largest alternative farming organization at the time, with a long history and an elaborated ideology, but its problem was that the mysticism involved limited its power of attraction for wider audiences.

KRAV—Labeling the Good

In the early 1980s, there was no institutionalized cooperation between the different alternative farming organizations, and until 1986, there was not even an accepted definition of alternative farming. Moreover, it was expensive and complicated to be an alternative consumer, not least because the quantity produced on each farm was small and producers were geographically dispersed. Initiatives with informal networks of distribution and home deliveries were not very successful.[36] Compared with the relative success of new food co-ops in the United States, the older cooperative movement played the most important part in Swedish developments.[37]

The Swedish Cooperative Union (KF),[38] which was firmly integrated in the postwar corporatist regime, was also the largest retailer of food in Sweden. In KF, individual membership formed the basis for consumer loyalty. Therefore, it was an important moment in 1984

33. Vail et al., *The Greening*, 144–5.
34. Ibid; 10–3; Anshelm, *Det vilda, det vackra.*
35. Vail et al., *The Greening*, 123; Rydén, *Marknaden, miljön*, 113–4.
36. Interview Gunnar Rundgren.
37. Belasco, *Appetite*, 87–93; Meyer von Bremen, "Ekologiskt lantbruk," 3–8.
38. KF is the parent company for the KF Group, including, for example, the food store chain Coop (formerly Konsum).

when individual members pushed the board to make environmentally friendly food available at the KF stores.[39] Alternative farmers had already delivered small quantities to KF stores with dedicated managers, but KF's new direction opened up possibilities of their gaining access to its nationwide distribution net. However, KF managers only wanted to negotiate with one counterparty, and this spurred the alternative farmers to find a new way to cooperate internally.[40]

The outcome of these negotiations was two new organizations in 1985. The first—Alternativodlarnas Riksförbund (ARF)—was open to all professional alternative farmers. ARF established itself as a center for information and advice, and it managed to enter the agricultural policy network in the early 1990s.[41] The other organization was KRAV (Kontrollföreningen för Alternativ Odling), the first independent organization for the management of alternative farms and their products. In order to ensure its independence from the individual farmer, it was decided that membership would only be granted to organizations. The alternative farming organizations were the first members, but later conventional retailers and dairies joined too. KRAV's most important task was to establish and market an eco-label, which would include all sorts of alternative farmers. Individuals who applied for the right to use the KRAV label had to follow a transformation program for certification. Once a farmer signed up, KRAV made yearly inspections, and if the farmer followed the rules, he could attach a KRAV sticker to his products. Due to the lack of political regulation, KRAV, in comparison with the USDA organic seal, was initially more loosely connected to the Swedish government. This changed partially when the government authorized KRAV as Sweden's official eco-label in 1993, but the revision of rules continued to be decided by the members.

KRAV's first conditions for certifying alternative farming were short and easily understood: farmers were not allowed to use synthetic pesticides or fertilizers. These two rules defined the least common denominator among the members of KRAV; its former chairman, Gunnar Rundgren, described them as the first important victory:

> Above all, Bengt Carlsson and I were only interested in simple rules. Skip the ideology, just give us simple rules! Not because it was uninteresting, but because we just wanted to know what was allowed and what was not. That was our focus. Prior to KRAV, both the Biodynamic Association and FOBO had a lot of

39. Terrvik, *Att kanalisera*, 58.
40. Interview Mikael Robertsson; Interview Gunnar Rundgren.
41. Rydén, *Miljön & politiken*, 77–81.

very nice words, but when it came down to what you could do or could not do, it was very fluffy.[42]

The formation of KRAV could, thus, be described as an act of pragmatic idealism. This attitude remained an explicit strategy among its members, which was also demonstrated in the openness towards agribusinesses' membership. The KRAV board considered alliances not only a strategic way to reach new consumers but also an economic necessity. It applied for, and was granted, funds from both the conventional farmers' association (LRF) and from foundations with roots in the alternative movements. At the beginning of 1986, KF decided to contribute financially to KRAV, and later that year KF and LRF became the first members of KRAV outside the alternative farmers' organizations.[43] This pragmatic idealism was further institutionalized in the annual revision of the rules. Because KRAV was open to membership from all kinds of organizations, all actors on the market could guard or advance their interests, implying not only that they had to make their claims explicit, but also that they had to compromise in order to have a market to exploit. The annual negotiations became a crucial inter-organizational activity, which not only shaped the eco-label, but, as a consequence, also contributed to the general public's idea of what alternative (later organic) farming was.[44] In 1985 the rules covered one page, then grew to twenty-five pages by 1990, fifty-two pages in 1995, 105 pages in 2000, and 183 pages in 2005. The growth can be explained both by greater detail, and by new areas of certification—such as the board's decision in 1987 to incorporate animal husbandry.

One KRAV project was specified to include issues of animal welfare and food processing, and headed by the milk producer Jörgen Hedeås, who distributed the preliminary rules to 29 organizations, companies, and authorities for comments. The dairies were negative in their response because they were afraid that eco-labeled milk would put conventional milk in an unfavorable light. This critique did not stop KRAV from proceeding, but a compromising attitude prevailed as several paragraphs were altered and/or clarified according to the dairies' remarks.[45] Thus, KRAV not only provided the alternative farmers with a new eco-label but it also became an important forum for conventional actors to negotiate with them the content of the organic farming concept. Compared with its predecessors, KRAV was a success (see table 1). In just a few years KRAV's

42. Interview Gunnar Rundgren. For FOBO, see n27.
43. Broberg, "To Do Business," 187–8.
44. Interview Inger Källander.
45. The negotiation process is explored in Broberg, "To Do Business," 186–90.

Table 1 Farmers and hectares of arable land complying with KRAV rules, 1985–1996

Year	Hectares	Farmers
1985	1,500	150
1986	2,500	321
1987	4,870	466
1988	8,598	665
1989	23,600	1,607
1990	28,500	1,588
1991	31,968	1,530
1992	33,267	1,489
1993	36,674	1,507
1994	48,039	1,695
1995	83,490	2,473
1996	113,995	2,741

Source: Broberg (2007) p. 186.

pragmatic idealism raised the organization to its position as the unchallenged symbol for alternative farming in Sweden.

The increased numbers of farmers and conventional actors brought new challenges. The organization was established to unite Sweden's alternative farmers, but success also posed a threat to their already existing organizations. Disagreements with the other alternative farming organizations resulted in a long-standing divide in the movement. While KRAV's leadership wanted to separate the control function and counseling on best farming practices as much as possible, other organizations saw them as inherently connected. As a result, the Biodynamic Association left KRAV and focused on its own eco-label. FNO was also unhappy with the proposed rules for animal husbandry, which it considered too close to conventional regulations.[46] However, when these conflicts erupted in 1989, KRAV was strong enough to stand on its own. FOBO and FNO were very small organizations, and the Biodynamic Association retreated to its anthroposophic niche. The organizations continued to communicate with each other, but the conflict still marked a watershed in organizational development.[47]

In 1989, a KRAV committee, headed by KF's representative, began to analyze the situation. Its work became the start of a reorganization of KRAV, both internally and externally, which took several years to implement. KRAV professionalized its administration, and the conventional actors' influence strengthened when the system of associated

46. Lantbrukets Affärstidning, "Konflikt hos Krav," 12.
47. Interview Gunnar Rundgren and Inger Källander.

membership was removed. This system had guaranteed the original members' control over KRAV.[48]

Because of the connotations attached to the word "alternative", using it became problematic when wider circles of people and interest groups got engaged in environmentally friendly consumption. The alternative movement in Sweden also emerged as a political force looking beyond the traditional left/right spectrum, and the formation of the Green Party became an attempt to direct these critical currents into parliamentary politics. This meant, however, that "alternative" became ideologically charged, with connotations from a wide range of positions.[49] Thus, unsurprisingly, many actors who found business opportunities within the burgeoning environmentally sensitive sector found it difficult to use the term "alternative". After internal discussions, KRAV replaced it with "organic" in 1992 and the definition of organic farming was altered so that "alternative" was replaced by "organic", "self-sustaining" was replaced by "sustainable", and "agro-eco system in balance" was replaced by "production of good and healthy foodstuffs and other agricultural products of high quality."[50]

In the early 1990s organic farmers intensified their lobbying efforts and deepened cooperation with the political sphere. These initiatives bore fruit in 1993, when the government confirmed KRAV as the official regulatory organization for organic foodstuffs and in 1994, when the Swedish parliament adopted a national goal of 10 percent organic farming by the year 2000.[51] So, while KRAV in 1990 still echoed the voice of its ideological and historical roots, the organization in 1995 connected much more to a discourse of ecological modernization, with its neo-liberal undertones. One of the leading representatives of the organic farming movement, Inger Källander, described this change: "The image of the organic farmer is no longer that of a long-haired hippie producing for household consumption, but that of a modern market-minded agricultural expert who is prepared to meet the future demands for high quality and environmentally sound food production."[52]

From Corporate Threat to Brand Value

The institutionalization of the environmental movement fundamentally changed the market conditions for organic foods. The alternative

48. Friberg, *Femton goda år*, 22–44; Broberg, "To Do Business," 190–1.
49. Wiklund, *I det modernas landskap*, 305–6.
50. Friberg, *Femton goda*, 32–52; Interview Inger Källander.
51. Rydén, *Miljön & politiken*, 132–3; Friberg, *Femton goda*, 37.
52. Källander, "Organic Agriculture in Sweden," 278.

Table 2 Structural change within the dairy sector, 1950–1990

Year	Farmers Number	Cows Number	Dairies Number	Production Tons, milk
1950	267,793	1,621,258	422	3,917,738
1960	201,373	1,298,500	263	3,926,000
1970	84,716	757,749	50	2,752,122
1980	42,248	655,738	27	3,337,584
1990	24,786	555,000	20	3,432,479

Source: Statistical Yearbook, various years.

movement's self-sufficiency ideology gradually gave ground to alliances with conventional actors, who could provide valuable informational and distributional networks. To further explore this change, we turn to the market for eco-labeled milk, which underwent a radical transformation in the early 1990s. In 1985 milk production was not even considered for inclusion in KRAV's rules because it was logical to start with simpler food chains like vegetables and grain. Furthermore, the first generation of alternative producers and consumers were more interested in vegetarian diets, whereas milk, for some, was an animal product to be shunned.[53] Ten years later eco-labeled dairy products were KRAV's largest sector, and after the merger with its Danish counterpart—MD Foods—in 2000, Arla became the world's largest producer of organic milk. How did this change come about?

Since the mid-nineteenth century, milk has been an important foodstuff in many industrialized countries.[54] Dominant social discourses have ascribed different symbolic meanings to the production and consumption of milk.[55] During the 1930s and 1940s milk was incorporated into the story of a modern Sweden—milk was seen as bringing health and good nutrition to the working classes of the newly urbanized economy. Furthermore, milk played a role in a postwar discourse about the rationality of national self-sufficiency, local monopolies, and agricultural modernization/consolidation (see table 2). This fitted well into the hegemonic social democratic vision of a modern Swedish welfare state, where high productivity created room for efficiencies and economic reforms.[56]

53. Interview Gunnar Rundgren.

54. DuPuis, *Nature's Perfect Food*; O'Rourke, "Property Rights, Politics"; Stanziani, "Negotiating Innovation."

55. Modshorst, "Andelsbaevegelsen"; Sommestad, "Från mejerska till mejerist"; Nimmo, *Milk, Modernity.*

56. Jönsson, *Mjölk*, 27–41.

Eco-labeled milk was a reaction to this rationalization process. By 1988 the rules for producing KRAV-certified milk were in place.[57] Still, with the dairies' skeptical attitude, it was not likely that the production would take off unless something unexpected changed the situation. This is exactly what happened in 1989. The neo-liberal critique mentioned earlier worked its way into the dairy market, and a local initiative caused a stir within the industry. As it turned out, these two shifts opened the door for KRAV-certified milk.

In April 1989 GATT administrators launched an influential proposal for a deregulation of the international food trade. This external driving force was supplemented by internal pressure when Sweden's consumer committee for agricultural policy declared that structural reforms were necessary. Bo Dockered, the chairman of the farmers' organization LRF, had been a member of this committee.[58] When invited to speak at Arla's 1989 annual meeting, he asked the farmers to reconsider their attitude towards the system of regulation. Instead of relying on political measures, the dairy sector had to find ways to remain competitive on an international market. Following Dockered, Arla's CEO—Carl-Arne Samuelsson—entered the stage and formulated the overall strategies for the coming years. At the top of his list Samuelsson put (1) consumer orientation and (2) branding.[59] These were not just empty rhetoric but part of a larger organizational change within Arla wherein a new management system prioritized product development and branding. In other words, market-liberal discourse had been established among the top management of LRF and the Swedish dairy industry by the late 1980s.[60] In the long run this shift became decisive in the dairy industry's reactions towards eco-labeled milk.

The second shift of direction was caused by a local initiative to start the production of KRAV-certified milk. The dairy Värmlandsmejerier controlled 3 percent of the national market, and it was geographically concentrated to the central-western part of Sweden. The dairy's initiative originated from a group of farmers headed by Jörgen Hedeås—the prime mover in KRAV's rules for animal husbandry. The farmers became KRAV certified and persuaded the dairy to prepare the launch of *Alternative Milk*. In 1988 initiatives were also taken in neighboring

57. The most important elements of the rules dealt with organically/locally produced fodder and with issues of animal welfare. Broberg, "To Do Business," 189.

58. Flygare and Isacson, "Jordbruket," 250–2. GATT is the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. It was the predecessor of the World Trade Organization (WTO).

59. Arla annual meeting minutes 890207, A1a:62, Arla archives.

60. Melin, *Varumärket som strategiskt*, 228–31.

Denmark to promote eco-labeled milk.[61] That December an internal report to the Swedish dairies' organization acknowledged an increased interest in alternative farming: "The interest is a potential bomb that might detonate if KRAV-milk appears in the mass media and if the sales do well in Denmark."[62] A meeting convened in January 1989 with the Värmlandsmejerier management to gather more information. The dairies' organization declared that the biggest threat was that alternative milk's meaning could be distorted by the media. The board of Värmlandsmejerier did not share this point of view; instead, it argued that the launch was part of an adaptation to market conditions.[63] In the spring a series of articles in the daily press showed, however, that the threat was real—conventional farmers were accused of delivering milk from "sick" and "poisonous" cows, a contrast to expectations of alternative farmers' more careful practices. These accusations caused a stir within the industry. The Arla board decided to try to persuade Värmlandsmejerier not to launch KRAV-labeled milk.[64]

Despite the pressure Värmlandsmejerier stuck to its plan. To steer clear of negative comparisons between alternative and conventional milk, the dairies' organization then decided to get involved in the launch.[65] As the release day came closer, a conflict emerged because neither the design of the milk package nor the content of the advertisements proved to be in line with their intentions. The dairies' organization wanted two sentences removed from the package: the first one said that alternative milk "really satisfies the cows' natural needs" and the second one that alternative milk was "a natural consequence of a sound development". Värmlandsmejerier did not back down, and the package was released as planned. So, when Värmlandsmejerier announced the product rollout in October 1989, it challenged the rest of the Swedish dairy industry.[66] Still, the new milk was no immediate success. In spite of the producers' strong reactions, the introduction passed almost unnoticed. During the first three months the sales figures averaged only 4 tons per week; this amounted to only 0.5 percent of Värmlandsmejerier's sales (remembering that this firm represented just 3 percent of national capacity). It was clear

61. Lynggaard, "The Farmer Within," 91–7.
62. Internal memorandum 881206, F11:11, MMAB archives.
63. Meeting minutes, Karlstad 890125, F11:10, MMAB archives.
64. Arla board meeting minutes 890419, A1a:62, Arla archives.
65. Internal memorandum 890821 and Press material 890828, F11:13, MMAB archives.
66. Several letters and telefaxes were exchanged in September and October. In the end Bo Forsling (MMAB) wrote that MMAB would take no responsibility for the launch, F11:12 and F11:13, MMAB archives.

that after just a few months, there was an impending risk that the concept of eco-labeled milk would not survive.[67]

Events in 1990 showed that the issue of alternative milk did not develop in isolation, as the recycling of milk packages became a symbol in the environmental debate.[68] In March media attention intensified when the daily paper *Östra Småland* published an editorial on Arla's refusal to deliver alternative milk to KF in Örebro and Stockholm. The title was: "The Arla monopoly—a scandal". The editorial used the issues of recycling and alternative milk to accuse Arla of not taking the environmental challenges seriously. Arla's dominant position was used in rhetorical terms to say that its board was living in the past and that it was not the market-minded actor one should expect. CEO Carl-Arne Samuelsson responded to the accusations, but the article was followed by pressure from the KF and LRF.[69] These organizations claimed that the Swedish agricultural sector would have to pay a high price if Arla continued to refuse to deliver eco-labeled milk.[70] By spring it had become clear that the environmental issue had to be dealt with strategically by the dairy industry. So, while Värmlandsmejerier's KRAV milk enjoyed limited success in terms of sales figures, it still pushed Arla to reconsider its strategy.

The board investigated the possibility of developing a competing eco-label, together with KF, but since KF was already involved in KRAV, its board was not interested. When the Arla board learned that they could gain influence over the label if it joined KRAV, it signed up for membership.[71] Arla also changed its strategy by launching its own eco-labeled milk in 1991, in cooperation with KF. In an attempt to strike a balance between "alternative" and "environmentally-friendly-in-general", the milk was certified by KRAV but not referred to as KRAV milk. Rather, the new milk would be called *Eco-milk*, alluding to "organic" more than "alternative". The milk package design was radically different from the rest of Arla's product assortment.[72] Arla's new milk quickly sold out the first month, and its launch was described as a success. However, the initial enthusiasm faded when supply became larger than demand. This, in turn, made the Arla board cautious. In February 1992 CEO Åke Modig declared that Eco-milk was not a good deal for the dairy but that it was important

67. MMAB's evaluation 900409, F11:12, MMAB archives. Interview with Jörgen Hedeås.

68. Correspondence 891120 and internal memorandum 900424, F62:6, MMAB archives.

69. Ahlqvist, "Arlamonopolet," 2; Samuelsson, "Arlas vd svarar," 2.

70. Correspondence May 1990, F11:10, MMAB archives.

71. Arla board meeting minutes 900314, Arla archives.

72. Arla board meeting minutes 910426, Arla archives.

to show the consumers that Arla met their differing demands.[73] This attitude—organic milk as a necessary evil, rather than as a strategic product—continued to prevail. Once again eco-labeled milk seemed doomed.

Still, general environmental concerns turned the tide once more. In early 1993 there were clear signs of an increased interest in "green consumption", and environmental NGOs again targeted non-recyclable milk packages to illustrate the wastefulness of modern consumer culture.[74] The dairy industry summoned a meeting with their supplier of milk packages—Tetra Pak—and when Naturskyddsföreningen's campaign was held in September, the industry was well prepared. Arla and Tetra Pak held a joint press conference where they announced the release of a new type of recycling process which minimized the environmental impact of cardboard packages. In this way, the dairy industry managed to avoid too much negative publicity, ending attempts by environmental NGOs to push for milk in glass bottles in Sweden. The general public now considers recyclable cardboard packages to be environmentally friendly.[75] The increased interest in green consumption by spring 1993 was noted by a government report as well as by the dominating retailers KF and ICA (*Inköpscentralernas aktiebolag*). For example, ICA seized the opportunity to launch a private brand of organic products. Sales of KF's organic private brand also rose, and dairy products became the largest group within the brand. Despite this, Arla's sale of Eco-milk remained low.[76]

Arla's board decided that something had to be done. The timing was right to adopt a new strategic approach to environmental issues, and the company's re-positioning included several steps.[77] First of all, the board appointed a group to work out an environmental policy, yielding a document focused on how the company would work strategically with environmental issues. Five areas were identified: agricultural practices, organic products, transports, processing methods, and packaging. Later published and distributed both internally and externally, the document was no empty words, for Arla actually launched projects in each of these areas—such as the above-mentioned new recycling methods for cardboard packages.[78] The fact that

73. Arla annual meeting minutes 920205, A1a:63, Arla archives.

74. Internal memorandum 930102, F62:6, MMAB archives; Arla annual meeting minutes 930211, A1a:66, Arla archives.

75. Byström, "Kretsloppor," 5; Report from Tetra Pak/SIFO 941216, F62:7, MMAB's archive.

76. Kristianstadsbladet, "Stor efterfrågan"; Åhlberg, "Änglamark mjölk"; Friberg, "Femton goda," 39.

77. Broberg, "To Do Business," 198.

78. Arla, *Arla och miljön*.

the company's total environmental efforts received a prominent position in the following year's annual report testified to the increased importance of environmental issues. Clearly, the board had changed from a reactive to a proactive stance. It is important to note that KRAV-certified products were suddenly considered a goodwill asset, rather than a problem. Product manager Anne-Marie Lindstedt declared that organic milk was not a fad and that Arla would offer a larger variety as soon as there were enough farmers to produce it.[79] Accordingly, Arla initiated a fund to promote research on organic milk, to which the company committed itself to contribute 500,000 SEK annually (about U.S.$67,000 at mid-1990s exchange rates) for at least five years.[80]

Furthermore, the board changed its course in relation to organic products. It deepened its alliance with KF in order to establish strategic cooperation with the leading actor on the market for organic foodstuffs. The result was that Arla took over production of dairy products for KF's organic private brand. This was an important deviation from the company's earlier principle not to do subcontracting work for other firms, but the board saw this as a way to catch up without taking too much of a risk.[81] Arla's directors raised the premium paid to organic milk producers to increase the supply, while at the same lowering the retail price to stimulate demand. The campaign—*The Milk of the Future* [*Framtidens Mjölk*]—also included a re-launch of eco-labeled milk, which reached the market in 1994. It was homogenized, the package design was in line with Arla's other products, and the fat level was lowered to that of ordinary semi-skimmed milk. The new milk was called organic, instead of eco-milk, signaling that it was a product for a broader audience with an environmental consciousness. The overall ambition was to move eco-labeled milk from being a niche product to being integrated in Arla's strategic branding. The launch aimed to embed values of naturalness and corporate responsibility in the new milk, without discrediting the firm's regular assortment. Therefore, Arla's advertising department tested the commercials on both "regular families" and "environmentally concerned consumers" before the launch.[82]

79. Svenska Dagbladet, "Ekologisk mjölk."

80. Board meeting minutes 940923, 941020, and 950412, A1a:68, Arla's archive.

81. Arla board meeting minutes 930929 and 931026, A1a:67, Arla archives. See also Fri Köpenskap, "Arla och Konsum"; Byström, "Arla tillverkar"; Byström, "Egen mjölk"; Mjölkdags, "Jönköping."

82. Board meeting minutes 940617 and 940809, A1a:67-68, Arla's archive; Byström, "Arla nysatsar"; Jansson, "Nu är lavinen igång"; TT, "Snart finns ekomjölk."

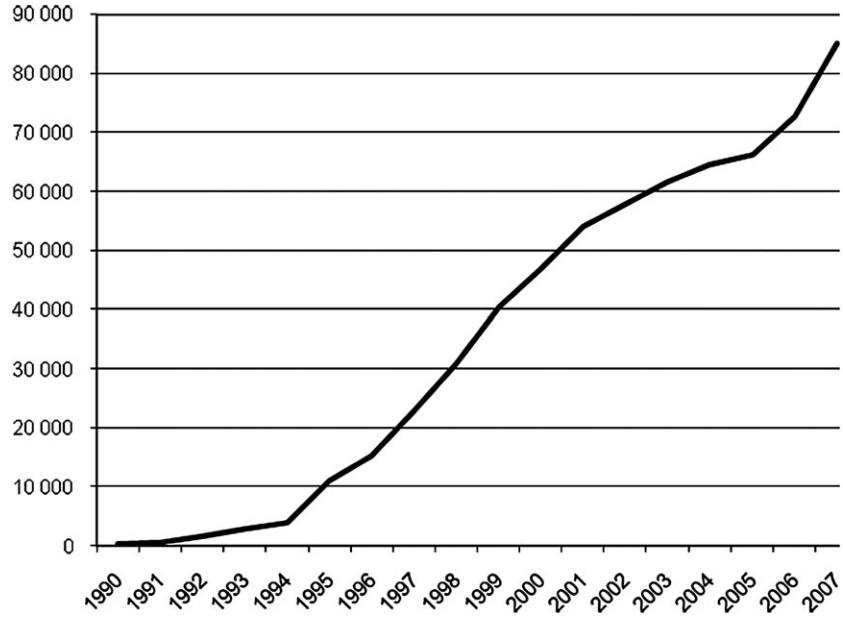

Figure 1 Production of KRAV-certified consumption milk in Sweden 1990–2007 (tons). *Source: Svensk Mjölk [Statistics from the organization Swedish Milk].*

Arla's shift of direction made a direct impact on the Swedish market for organic milk (figure 1). Between 1993 and 1995 the production of KRAV-certified milk quadrupled. Arla's share of this expansion was at least 80 percent. The board evaluated the campaign as a success; sales figures were good and market research showed that advertising had managed to connect properties like health, environmentally friendly production, and naturalness with Arla, which strengthened Arla's brand.[83]

KRAV celebrated Arla's campaign as marking the takeoff for marketing organic milk in Sweden. Other dairies followed suit, and dairy products, with one-third of the market, has been the largest sub-sector in the Swedish organic foods ever since.[84] Arla's marketers built on a long-standing tradition of milk consumption in Sweden, which they successfully used to connect organic milk to the pastoral dreams of an urban population (the consumption of organic milk is far higher in big cities). Organic milk production also generates the transformation of arable land since the rules for KRAV-certified milk demand a high degree of locally and organically produced fodder. Therefore organic milk has been very important in Sweden and in many other countries, even though the market has remained marginal compared with conven-

83. Arla board meeting minutes 950110, A1a:68, Arla archives.
84. Ekologiska Lantbrukarna, "Växande marknad," 2.

tional milk (reaching just 9 percent in 2007).[85] In 2007, when the leading representatives of the sector put together a visionary action plan on how to increase the organic market share, milk production was called "the locomotive" of the organic foodstuff industry in Sweden.[86]

Alternative Visions and Organic Branding—Concluding Remarks

In the 1960s an ordinary grocery store offered roughly ten kinds of dairy products; today that number ranges between 100 and 1,000 depending on the store.[87] In such fiercely competitive conditions there is no such thing as "ordinary" milk or butter. Instead, dairies and retailers differentiate their products along several different lines: "locally produced", "functional food", "old-fashioned", and/or "environmentally friendly". As noted by Michael Pollan, environmentally friendly products have not only turned into big business in the last decade but have also developed a literary genre to embed the values consumers are prepared to pay a premium for—the supermarket pastoral. The idea that concerns about the future of the planet have turned into marketing-lit is a provocative thought for large segments of the environmental movement. At the same time these narrative aspects of consumption are a pervasive phenomenon of late modern capitalism, as noted in a burgeoning field of research.[88] This article ventures into the conflict underpinning the supermarket pastoral: should organic food be part of an altogether alternative vision for the economy, or should it be incorporated as a niche within a capitalist mode of production? And what can history teach us about the interplay between the environmental movement and agribusiness?

I argue that conflicts between radical and reformist elements are an integral part of the history of organic food. However, the dividing line between the two sides is not as sharp and static as is sometimes described, and the outcome of the conflicts is not predictable. Historical studies can unravel the multiplicity of actors, and more awareness of the inter-organizational dynamics is vital for a better understanding of the growth of "green markets" in general and the role of eco-labels in particular. In research focused on the U.S. market, attention has been directed towards an alleged hostile takeover by agribusiness. The analysis here describes a somewhat different story, more in line with the

85. Swedish Milk Statistics [www.svenskmjolk.se].
86. Ekologiskt Forum, "Aktionsplan 2010," 47.
87. Jönsson, *Mjölk*, 45–7.
88. Weber et al., "Forage for Thought"; Boström et al., "Studying Political."

idea of a creative conflict, as developed by Michelsen et al.,[89] implying a more fruitful interaction of the actors involved. Especially important for the Swedish case is that patterns of path dependency may be explained by the cooperative movement because of its role as a broker between alternative and conventional interest groups. The creative conflict was also institutionalized in Sweden through the construction of the Swedish eco-label—KRAV—authorized by the government but run jointly by alternative and conventional actors. The pragmatic idealism developed by KRAV's board enabled the organization to become a forum for alternative and conventional actors to meet, negotiate, and compromise.

During the 1970s and the 1980s, the foundations of Swedish agriculture were brought into question by the alternative movement on the one hand and free-market advocates on the other. There were similar debates in Denmark and Norway, but EC membership in the former case and oil income in the latter gave policy development in the Nordic countries different momenta.[90] The result in Sweden was that the ideology of farmer-friendly national autarky lost many of its supporters. The Swedish cooperative movement ceded its hegemony as deregulation and competition were incorporated into politicians' vocabularies, and the emergence of a competition paradigm strengthened the consumption side of the agricultural economy, relative to the production side. In the late 1980s, the public debate shifted and consumers' *willingness to pay*, rather than producers' *technological productivity*, was seen as the key to survival for Swedish agriculture.

The question then arose: what were consumers willing to pay for? Or in other words: what kind of story would sell the goods in this new setting? The environmental movement delivered such a story, and the dairy sector provides a good illustration of how business started to capitalize on environmental concerns through conscious branding. Arla had played an important part in the postwar corporatist economy, but because of organizational changes in the early 1990s, it responded to the eco-labeled milk prospect chiefly according to the new free-market mindset. This meant that the Arla board played a waiting game in relation to KRAV milk in the early 1990s. However, several instances of negative publicity in relation to environmental issues, in combination with a real market opportunity in 1994, led the board to change its course. Arla incorporated eco-labeled milk in its strategic branding, and by the early 2000s it had established itself as a leading global player in this market.

89. Michelsen et al., *Organic Farming Development*.

90. Hofer, "Labelling of Organic Food," 176–85; Rydén, *Miljön & politiken*, 23–47.

In *Administrative Science Quarterly*'s 2008 special issue on social movements in organizations and markets, Davis et al. identified five types of themes: organizations as targets of social movements, organizations as collaborators with movements, organizations as carriers of social movements, organizations as manifestations of movements, and markets as outcomes of social movements.[91] The overriding conclusion of this case study is that the interaction between corporations and social movements is of vital importance to understanding the modern environmental movement and the emergence of a market for organic food. All the themes discussed by Davis et al. emerged in this case study. Arla was attacked by the environmental movement (with the help of the media), but the board's initial hostility was gradually replaced by a willingness to cooperate. The explanation for this can be found in the general public's growing environmental awareness (supported by political measures in this direction), the interdependence of different environmental issues, and the uncertainty about whether KRAV milk was distinctively better for the environment. Together these three aspects opened up a new potential market in the mid-1990s. So, on the one hand, the alternative vision of a radically different type of economy gave the market for organic food its initial momentum, and the alternative movement invested in the sunk costs for institutional formation. On the other hand, the market for KRAV-labeled milk in Sweden did not take off until it was deemed to add brand value to Arla, the nation's largest dairy. This, in turn, was seen as a victory by some but by others as a battle lost.

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91. Davis et al., "Introduction."

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